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# PRUNING HIS WAY TO A NEW NICHE IN THE ART WORLD

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selves."

To achieve his "look" in floral composition, Snyder uses all the skills and knowledge he acquired while studying painting and sculpture at UC San Diego. The strongest influence on him there was that of internationally respected artist Italo Scanga, who assembles and paints found materials in sculptures.

The principles guiding Snyder are a concern for the materials used, a fully developed synthesis of Oriental and Occidental aesthetics, and freshness—in the way the flowers are put together as well as in their newness.

The primary formal quality of composition that Snyder expresses with flowers is structure, which, for him, is determined by gravity.

"You don't contrive compositions," he said. "You don't force your materials to do things they don't do naturally. If they droop, let them droop."

Snyder also favors an absence of symmetry in his compositions, although there is always balance.

Finally, he likes to use things that you don't expect to see, to mix the uncommon with the common. For example, he may combine thistles that he has gathered in a field with hot-house blossoms. Or he may mix pieces of scrap metal with exotic foliage.

In his botanical sculptures, the 28-year-old entrepreneur unites visual arts and plants, interests he has had as long as he can remember. Precociously, he started collecting plants as a small child. Since the family moved frequently, he never developed an identity with a community or a strong group of friends.

"I guess I put down roots through my plants," he joked.

During his high school years, he became serious about his avocation and began to import exotic plants. While attending UCSD, he started a mail-order business.

His major at UCSD was neither botany nor art, but interdisciplinary studies in Chinese culture—language, literature, history, sociology, anthropology and religion. He had a double minor in visual arts and biology, however. During a monthlong visit to China, he collected orchids in Szechuan Province.

BARBARA MARTIN / Los Angeles Times

*John Snyder starts to work on one of his floral creations.*

Reflecting the Chinese influence, Snyder strives to emulate the character of 17th-Century Chinese painting. He especially admires the work of T'ung Ch'i-ch'ang.

"I try to create an awkward look," he explained. "I don't want a studied look like ikebana, which is too bound by rules. Plants don't follow rules and artists don't follow rules.

"I do, however, like the Japanese quality of *wabi*, or sparseness. I like a minimal look in floral design. The important thing is the human touch. I want the look of improvisation. Flowers are the colors of my palette and my sculptural forms."

Snyder pointed out that his associate, James Partain, is influencing the development of the "look."

"James is experienced in the floral industry and talented in his own right," Snyder said. "His understanding of history, art and music affects the way he works with flowers.

"We feel that flowers are as much a part of civilized life as clothes, food, the furniture you live with and the music you listen to."

Snyder's ambition is nothing less than to affect the total culture of San Diego—in a very subtle and beautiful way, through flowers.

## AT THE GALLERIES

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tion.

This handsome, huge environment composed of 210 panels (each 15 by 19 inches) measuring approximately 6 by 78 feet on two walls looks like a slick, corporate presentation. But its content juxtaposes "God, Gold and Glory" against slavery and massacres.

The exhibition, part of which is documented in a book, continues through Nov. 8.

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